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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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China: PLA Recruitment Faces Competition ☐

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Summary

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) evidently has begun to resolve problems of recruiting quality personnel that developed as a result of Deng Xiaoping's economic reform policies and the PLA's professionalization drive. Although numbers of recruits were never a serious problem, the armed forces have had to compete with the civilian sector for better educated youth, particularly from urban areas. Improved civilian job prospects in both city and countryside plus decreased perquisites attending military service have made the PLA less attractive for China's high school graduates, a situation that has concerned senior military leaders. Recent guarantees of preferential treatment for veterans and improved service education and training opportunities have alleviated the problem somewhat, and although the PLA will face continued difficulty in attracting the higher quality recruits it needs, it does appear to be meeting its overall manpower needs through its revised recruitment program. ☐

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One of Deng Xiaoping's major objectives has been to streamline, professionalize, and thereby modernize the PLA. To achieve this goal he has been struggling to rid

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the Army's swollen ranks of incompetent personnel and has overseen the setting of new standards to ensure better quality soldiers are recruited. []

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Until recently, the PLA had no problem attracting either the quantity or quality of volunteers* it desired. Although the number of recruits still seems plentiful, we believe the PLA has had a problem finding the caliber of men it seeks. The success of the agricultural responsibility system adopted in 1978 and the incentives provided by recent economic reforms reduced the PLA's image as a good place to "earn one's stripes" and guarantee future success. Consequently many youth have begun to view the PLA as something of an employer of last resort. []

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Revised Standards: In Search of Quality

The PLA has had to revise its recruitment process** and set higher education standards to meet Deng's goals of professionalization and modernization. During the winter recruitment campaign of 1983, for example, the State Council and Central Military Commission issued a directive requiring recruits from rural areas to be junior middle school graduates and urban recruits to be high school graduates. The winter 1984 recruitment campaign set similar requirements, but extended eligibility criteria to include high school graduates from the previous year who may have tried and failed to gain admittance to university.***

*Although registration for recruitment is mandatory for all males reaching the age of 18, the overabundant supply of those eligible makes recruitment a matter of selection rather than a struggle for numbers, hence the successful candidates are referred to as "volunteers." []

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**A procedural change introduced during the winter 1984 recruitment campaign was the transfer of responsibility for all stages of recruitment--selection, physical examination, security check, transportation to PLA unit--from the PLA to local county or municipal armed forces departments. This move is ostensibly intended to save the PLA money, manpower, and time. A further procedural change requires all eligible but nondrafted "volunteers" to be registered as members of a reserve force. []

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***Diminished attention to class/political background--in keeping with Deng's pragmatic approach--also aids the search for better educated soldiers. []

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Prior to 1979, the majority of recruits came from the countryside. With the premium now placed on better educated youth, the policy has shifted toward seeking an even distribution from urban and rural areas. Urban youth generally receive better education than rural youth and we believe recruiters will increasingly use their influence to induce local administrative organs and educational institutions to supply them with high grade personnel. However, both urban and rural youth have ample reasons to be reluctant to join the PLA.

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The PLA as an Option for Urban Youth: Attractive Alternatives

For educated youth living in urban areas, the renewed acceptance and better treatment of intellectuals and the improved opportunities afforded by Deng's new economic policies have combined to make military service a less attractive option. According to Japanese press reporting in mid-February, a common sentiment expressed by youth in Beijing today is: "College student first, factory worker second, or if nothing else is available, join the PLA." The same source indicates that the old Chinese adage, "Good men are not used for soldiers" is again current and that the revolutionary spirit of self-sacrifice is fast being replaced by a desire for a comfortable life-style. The new education and work opportunities opening up as a result of reforms probably have created a keen sense of urgency among youth to get on with their careers. Given the premium placed on seniority, many probably view military service as a troublesome delay.

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The PLA as an Option for Rural Youth: Diminishing Incentives

For peasant youth, the PLA no longer offers a better salary and living conditions, a chance of permanent relocation or a guaranteed good job following demobilization. Instead, a peasant stands a chance of earning a better living in the civilian sector. Rural families, moreover, now want sons to stay on the farm, where additional labor can now mean greater income. The reluctance of rural families to permit their sons to enter military service became so serious, in fact, that Beijing had to establish a system of material incentives--cash payments to families--to counter the problem. State support to soldiers and their families has reportedly doubled since 1978. Defending recent legislation guaranteeing increased preferential treatment to families of military personnel, PLA Chief of General Staff Yang Dezhi explained that the move was necessary "to guarantee the livelihood of Army dependents in light of the gradually improved circumstances in the civilian sector." (S NF)

The PLA's recently adopted policy requiring peasant youth to return to the site of their original enlistment following demobilization has provided a further disincentive to joining the Army. An advantage of military service in the past was that it gave peasant youth an otherwise unavailable

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opportunity to relocate. Ironically, now that relocation rules have been relaxed for the civilian sector following the decision on economic reform, peasants may see military service as an impediment to moving to the cities.

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Job Problems Following Demobilization

Urban industrial reforms--requiring more skilled manpower, improved efficiency, and profitable enterprise operation--may have made it more difficult for demobilized servicemen to find adequate jobs. The requirement that civilian industries and organizations absorb the ever-increasing numbers of demobilized personnel has strained civilian/military relations, as have factors such as urban unemployment and the unsatisfactory performances of ex-servicemen in management jobs. Civilian employers, themselves attempting to streamline their organizations, have challenged the qualifications of military transferees and have been reluctant to give them jobs.* Because the guarantee of a reasonable job was formerly a major incentive for many youth to join the PLA, knowledge of the problem has served to further dissuade them from enlisting.

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Measures to Address Competition

In order to counter competition, the PLA has had to revise its recruitment policies and offer material incentives. The new military service law adopted at an NPC session last May addressed some of the PLA's recruitment problems. Among its articles were guarantees of:

- Financial compensation to families of recruits from rural areas.
- Jobs for demobilized personnel who resided in urban areas prior to enlistment.
- Financial support and preferential treatment in finding jobs for demobilized personnel who resided in rural areas prior to enlistment.
- Resettlement allowance and land for demobilized personnel from urban areas volunteering to transfer to the countryside.

*Additionally, the legislation requiring the civilian sector to find jobs for demobilized soldiers appears to run counter to the new economic policy that advances autonomy for civilian managers in matters of hiring and firing.

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-- Priority entrance to institutes of higher learning for demobilized soldiers who score competitively on entrance examinations. []

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In addition to the provisions laid out by the law, other measures have been taken to encourage enlistment. Colleges and high schools have become the focal point of recruiting efforts and, according to a cadre [] the PLA is offering college graduates higher starting salaries and entry-level positions one or two grades higher than they would receive in the civilian sector to lure them to join the Army. The imminent introduction of new uniforms is aimed at boosting the PLA's image and demonstrating its professionalization. Placards of honor have been put up outside the homes of recruits' families and movies have been made to inspire patriotism. One local cadre who spoke with a PLA recruiter in late 1984 reported that military authorities are rumored to be considering allowing rural families to have a second child if they formally agree to the enlistment of their first son when he reaches 18. []

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Measures to Address Demobilization Problems

Military leaders appear very conscious of demobilization problems and have taken several measures to improve the situation. At a speech to the Central Military Commission last November, Deng Xiaoping called on the PLA to lend full support to the civilian sector to aid national reconstruction. He reiterated his 1977 call for military men to receive dual-purpose training to provide them with transferable skills and at the same time enhance the level of technical expertise in the PLA. Implementation of Deng's policy has provided an encouraging, valuable incentive to youth who might otherwise have been reluctant to sign up. []

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Last August, two national conferences in Beijing addressed the problem of demobilization. PLA General Political Department (GPD) director Yu Qiuli promised to implement special job-training and placement programs for demobilized officers though he gave no details. As for the job guarantees made in the new military service law, there are indications that the new law is being strictly carried out in an attempt to revive the job security incentive for joining the PLA. One source claimed that in cases where demobilized soldiers return to urban areas and find no job vacancies, they are entitled to the same pay and benefit allowances they received during military service until they find a job. []

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Current Level of Success

We believe the PLA is managing to overcome some of the recruitment problems it encountered following the success of the agricultural responsibility system and the recent economic reforms. A recent

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Liberation Army Daily article announced the successful completion of the winter 1984 recruitment campaign, hailing it as the first victory in the reform of the recruitment system. Other Chinese press reporting cites the GSD Mobilization Department's conscription section claim that the overall quality of this year's recruits has improved: 25 percent are either party or Communist Youth League members and the number rejected during military rescreening was 67 percent less than last year. The same article noted, however, that this year's recruits have a generally lower "cultural level"--i.e. have received less education--than those of last year. []

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The PLA traditionally has relied on nonmaterial incentives to attract volunteers. Appeals to patriotism, bravery, duty, and honor are still a very necessary part of the army's recruitment program. One reason some senior military leaders challenged party policies on modernization and reform in the past is that they saw these policies diluting the values the PLA cultivates to motivate its troops. They cited recruitment problems as evidence for their case. Unable to divert the reform tide, however, PLA recruiters have turned to other methods to attract a higher quality of recruit, and with some success. The scant evidence we have suggests that although the PLA is unable to compete for the best students, it still provides a career alternative for those who fall short of the top bracket. []

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There appears to be an inverse relationship between the success of economic reform and PLA recruitment. The current urban unemployment and the shortage of institutes of higher learning both aid the PLA's goal of attracting better educated recruits, and as job training programs and enhanced educational opportunities develop within the armed forces, we believe recruitment prospects will continue to improve. We also believe Beijing is sufficiently committed to the PLA's professionalization that it will make sufficient funds available for the training programs. []

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Traditionally, serving in the PLA meant a relatively comfortable existence, high prestige, and competitive pay. Now that these conditions are changing in a rapidly modernizing society, army recruiters are being forced to come to terms with the need to further enhance incentives for enlistment. As reforms raise living standards and improve employment prospects in the civilian economy, this problem may become more serious. At some point in the near future, the PLA may have to consider significantly improving its pay-scale and benefits program and upgrading its own higher education and training programs to make up for a generally lower level of enlistee. []

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